

## Understanding *Olam Haba* (The World to Come) – Pt. 1 – JewishClarity.com

### How much can we really understand *Olam Haba* (The World to Come)?

The **Rambam** wrote:

The early Sages already informed us that we have no ability to grasp the good of *Olam Haba* clearly. We can't know its greatness, beauty, and essence, only Hashem alone can. All of the goodness which the prophets prophesized about to Israel was only concerning physical matters which we will enjoy during the times of the *Mashiach* (Messiah), when kingship and sovereignty will return to Israel. The goodness of life in *Olam Haba*, however, is beyond our ability to value or compare. [Therefore,] the prophets never described it, in order to not diminish it through their description. This is what the prophet Yeshaya said — “The [human] eye never saw it, only Hashem alone.” And as the Sages said — “All of the prophets only prophesized about the days of *Mashiach*, but *Olam Haba* — ‘The [human] eye never saw it, only Hashem alone.’” (*Hilchos Teshuva* 8:7).

In fact, **Rav Dessler** suggested that our inability to understand *Olam Haba* is one reason why it is never explicitly stated in the Torah. He does mention, however, in the name of the Ramban (*Acharei Mot* — end), that the *kritut* of the *nefesh* (the cutting off of the soul) which the Torah does speak about, gives us a strong confidence in the existence of the souls after death, and in the giving of *s'char* (eternal benefit) in the world of the souls. (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* 5:389).

### Introduction to *Olam Haba*

The **Ramchal** explained (in *Derech Hashem*):

G-d's purpose in creation was to bestow His goodness to another. (1:2:1).

Man must earn this perfection, however, through his own free will and desire. (1:3:1).

G-d's goodness decreed that there be a limit to [the time period of] man's effort required to attain perfection. After this period is completed, he attains his level of perfection, and is then able to enjoy it for all of eternity. G-d therefore created two distinct periods, one as a time of earning, and the other as a time of receiving benefit. (1:3:3).

Since the aspect of good is greater, the period of earning is limited, and lasts no longer than G-d's wisdom decreed suitable for His purpose. The period of reward, however, has no limit, and man continues to derive pleasure from his earned perfection for all of eternity. (1:3:3).

G-d, therefore, created two worlds, *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world) and *Olam Haba* (the world to come). (1:3:4).

The purpose of the creation is that man should merit to attain the true good. The end point of this process is a connection to G-d and tranquility in *Olam Haba*. However, the Highest Wisdom decreed that it would be most fitting and appropriate for man to first exist in *Olam Ha'zeh* as the ideal preparation to reach this desired purpose. (2:2:1).

The ultimate and main place of benefit for good deeds is in *Olam Haba*, as we have said. The *s'char* (benefit) for the one who merits it is an eternal bonding with Hashem, and the *onesh* (negative consequence) is being pushed away from this true good and being lost. (2:2:3).

The *Medrash* (***Bereshit Rabba* 1:14**) tells us:

The world was made with the letter “*beit*” [the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet] to teach that there are really two worlds — *Olam Ha'zeh* and *Olam Haba*.

***Pirkei Avot* (4:21–22)** spells out the difference between these two worlds:

Rebbe Yaakov says — *Olam Ha'zeh* (this world) is similar to a lobby leading into *Olam Haba* (the world to come). Fix yourself in the lobby in order to enter the banquet hall. He [also] used to say — One moment of *teshuva* and good deeds in *Olam Ha'zeh* is greater than all of existence in *Olam Haba*; and one moment of spiritual pleasure or satisfaction in *Olam Haba* is greater than all of existence in *Olam Ha'zeh*.

### **Classical Sources about *Olam Haba***

The **Rambam** (*Hilchot Teshuva* 8:1) wrote:

The good which is hidden for the *tzadikim* (righteous) is *chayei Olam Haba* — life in the world to come. This is the life which has no death associated with it, and the good which has no bad associated with it... The *s'char* (benefit) for the *tzadikim* is that they should merit this pleasure and this good, and the negative consequence for the wicked is that they will not merit this life, but rather be cut off and die.

Reish Lakish said:

There is no *Gehenom* (eternal punishment) in the world to come, rather Hashem will bring out the sun from its container; *tzadikim* (the righteous) will be healed through it, and *reshayim* (the wicked) will be judged through it. (***Nedarim* 8b**).

The *Medrash* (***Otiot Rebbe Akiva* — 4**) says:

*Yisrael* asked the Master of the Universe for an example of *Olam Haba* in *Olam Ha'zeh*. G-d responded — this is what Shabbat is.

Similarly, the *Gemara* (*Brachot* 57b) states that Shabbat is one sixtieth of *Olam Haba*.

### ***Olam Haba* has no aspect of physicality at all**

The **Zohar** (*Shemot* 33) wrote:

*Olam Haba* has no body or form, and the *neshama* (soul) is clothed in spirituality.

The **Rambam** explained:

*Olam Haba* has no body or physical form, just the souls of *tzadikim* alone without a *guf* (physical body), like the angels. And since there is no physical form, there is no eating or drinking, and nothing that the body needs in *Olam Ha'zeh*. There is also nothing [physical] that occurs among the various [physical] things that occur to bodies in *Olam Ha'zeh*, for example sitting and standing, sleep and death, sadness and laughter, etc. The early Sages (*Brachot* 17a) thus said — *Olam Haba* has no eating, no drinking, no being fruitful and multiplying, [no business (giving and taking), no jealousy, no hatred, no competition (*tacharut*)] but rather *tzadikim* sit with their crowns on their heads and bask in the *ziv haShechina* (splendor of G-d's Presence). When it says that

“*tzadikim* are sitting,” it is a metaphor which means the *tzadikim* will be there without work or toil. And this which says “their crowns on their heads” means the knowledge that they know — which is what allowed them to merit to life in *Olam Haba* — is found with them, and it is their crown. (**Hilchot Teshuva 8:2**).

Know that in the same way that a blind person cannot recognize colors, a deaf person cannot perceive sounds, and a eunuch does not feel any desire for marital relations, similarly bodily creatures cannot experience spiritual pleasures. Just as the fish are not aware of the element of fire, as they live in the element of water, and the two elements are opposites, in the same manner we cannot know the pleasure of the spiritual world while we are in this material world. There is no such pleasure within our experience; only physical enjoyments and sensory perceptions of food, drink and other satisfactions of our senses. Spiritual enjoyment is almost non-existent [in this world], we cannot realize it and cannot attain it easily in our thinking, but only after a period of long and profound thought. This makes sense, since we are living in a physical world. For this reason we only attain its lowly, temporal pleasures. But spiritual pleasures are permanent, and continue forever without interruption. There is no similarity and no connection at all between these two kinds of pleasure.

After death, however, we will no longer be susceptible to physical pleasure, nor will we desire it. It would be like a powerful king abandoning his kingship and going back to playing ball with boys, as he had done before assuming the throne, in his young years, when he did not realize the difference in level between the two positions. It is specifically in this world that we praise and extol physical pleasure instead of spiritual pleasure. But when we think about these two types of enjoyment, we will notice the limitations of the one (i.e., physical) and the superiority of the other (i.e. spiritual), even in *Olam Ha'zeh*. We will find that the great majority of people will endure much pain and effort, both physical and spiritual, to attain greatness, glory and recognition. This is not the pleasure of food and drink. Or, [on the negative side], many people would prefer to take revenge on their enemies than to have even much physical enjoyment. Additionally, many people resist the greatest physical pleasure out of fear of shame and social degradation, or because they want to earn a good name. If this [appreciation of spiritual pleasure] is already so in this physical world, how much more must it apply in the spiritual world, namely the World to Come, where our souls will have an understanding of the Creator such as is found among the higher beings. (**Perek Chelek**).

### **This pleasure in *Olam Haba* will grow continually**

**Rav Dessler** wrote:

Whatever we are able to experience and grasp in *Olam Haba* will **continue to grow and increase**. This is the concept of the *tzadik* continuing to climb higher in *Olam Haba*. He won't only grow in his understanding to the next higher level, but this experience will also grow from level to level, forever and ever... This treasure will allow us to ascend higher and higher without end, forever and ever. And who is capable of picturing the incredible pleasure which will never stop growing and will become sharper and clearer forever?... Every bit of our Torah and *mitzvot*, every aspect of our fight against the *yeitzer hara* (negative inclination) which allowed us to grow in this world, is a separate root which will flourish continually in *Olam Haba*. With every aspect we will see the greatness of G-d's kindness and recognize His goodness, and this will continue forever and ever. We will come to *Olam Haba* with all of these roots together, and continually be elevated from them, separately as well as together.

An angel is called an *omeid* — one that is standing still. Since it has no *avodah* (active service) and *s'char*, it cannot have any development. Therefore, it always remains in its place. But the *tzaddik* — since he had constant development in *Olam Ha'zeh* in his *avodah*, he has constant development in his *s'char* in *Olam Haba* as well. (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* 287–288, 5:383).

**Rav Gifter** (*Shiurei Da'at*) quoted the *Gemara Brachot* (64) that tells us:

***Talmidei chachamim have no menucha (rest) — neither in Olam Ha'zeh nor in Olam Haba.***

In other words, just like in *Olam Ha'zeh*, they go from level to level, and ascend in their understanding and recognition of reality, it is the same in *Olam Haba*.

**Every *tzadik* will have his own separate and appropriate portion in *Olam Haba*.**

The ***Medrash*** (*Chayei Sara*) explains:

Hashem has many prepared places in that world (*Olam Haba*), and in all of them, there is a dwelling place for every single *tzadik*, according to the level which is fit for him. And there are others that are even further inside — i.e., they are not in the courtyard, but rather in the house. And there is a place for the elevated *chassidim* that enter inside even more than this, i.e., to the *heichal* (courtyard). There are dwelling places upon dwelling places, and lights upon lights, all separate from each other in that world. Every single person is shamed by the light of his friend. Just like the good actions of a person in *Olam Ha'zeh* are separate from that of his friend, similarly their dwelling places and lights are separate in that world.

**Husband and wife will be together in *Olam Haba*.**

**Rav Eliyahu Hatzarfati** (the author of *Aderet Eliyahu*), a Rav in the 1600s, pointed out that there is an important exception to this idea of every person having their own separate portion in *Olam Haba*:

In *Gan Eden*, the *neshamot* (souls) will be in pairs, male and female, man and wife, as is said in the *sefer Tzuf D'vash on Parshat Bereshit* (from Rabbi Vidal HaTzarfati, the grandfather of Rabbi Eliyahu Hatzarfati). He explains that — there is never a half-entity above, but only a complete entity. Once *ish v'ishto* (man and his wife) were in *Gan Eden* complete, and that is what Adam was, how then would it be possible that in [*Olam Haba*], he would be alone and she would be alone? It would not be proper if the male would not have his *eizer k'negdo* (help mate) [in *Olam Haba*]. In other words, just like she was with him in *Gan Eden*, she needs to be with him now [in *Olam Haba*]. This is why it doesn't mention any aspect of *yetzirah* (creation) regarding the woman [in *Gan Eden*] since she had already existed [with him]. Hashem merely needed to give her a physical form and bring her *neshama* (soul) down to this world.

**What happens in *Olam Haba*?**

**Rav Dessler** wrote:

Whatever happened in the world for 6,000 years, in terms of all of the choices of people, along with how Hashem related to them, down to the finest specifics and details, will be revealed to every single person in *Olam Haba*. And through this, the entire creation will join together in a single massive revelation of the combinations of the various Divine names. The various revelations will combine together to a huge and wondrous system. All of these revelations will be renewed and continuously multiplied in their combinations, and all of the *neshamot* (souls) of the *tzadikim* will learn from these revelations. That is what it means that they will be sitting and deriving pleasure from the *ziv haShechina* (splendor of G-d's presence). (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* 4:158).

**Differences between *Olam Ha'zeh* and *Olam Haba***

**Rav Dessler** discussed this:

In *Olam Ha'zeh*, we make the blessing *HaTov v'HaMeitiv* (the One Who is good and does good) on good news, and we say *Dayan HaEmet* (the True Judge) on bad news; but in *Olam Haba* — we will only say *HaTov v'HaMeitiv*. (*Gemara Pesachim* 50a).

In *Olam Ha'zeh*, it is impossible to see everything that happens to us as truly for our good. Even one on the level of Moshe Rabeinu would need to say the blessing of *Dayan HaEmet* on what he feels is negative from the perspective of *Olam Ha'zeh*. However, in *Olam Haba*, we will clearly see that all of the ways of Hashem are intrinsically good. That is why we will make the blessing of *HaTov v'HaMeitiv* on everything... Those concepts that we know today with our minds, will be [fully] revealed to us in *Olam Haba*. (*Michtav M'Eliyahu – Ikar hagilui sh'b'Olam Haba* 3:279).

The **Medrash** tells us:

In *Olam Ha'zeh*, individuals can prophesize, but in *Olam Haba*, all of Israel will be [like] *nevi'im* (prophets). (*B'ha'alo secha* 16 — *Medrash Tanchuma*).

**Sefer Halkarim** points out a fundamental distinction between individuals and the community — The prayers of the community are always answered and their situations are supervised and successful, more than with individuals. That is only true, however, with their success in *Olam Ha'zeh*. But in *Olam Haba*, the level of every single individual is according to their actions and the *mitzvot* which they did. And even doing an action which is not an actual mitzvah or prohibition, if the *kavanah* (intention) is *I'sheim Shamayim* (for the sake of Heaven) and for the sake of Hashem or His Torah, one will merit life in *Olam Haba* through it.

In other words, in *Olam Ha'zeh*, Hashem relates to us largely in terms of the community. In *Olam Haba*, however, he deals with us in terms of how we are as individuals.

**Rav Simcha Zissel** explained:

There is a difference between the pleasures of *Olam Ha'zeh* and *Olam Haba*. In *Olam Ha'zeh*, the greatest pleasure comes only after discomfort, while in *Olam Haba*, the actual pain turns into great joy. The *ameilut* (toil) in Torah and *avodat Hashem* is all that will remain for us in the various worlds. The *tzaar ha'amal* (pain of the toil) itself is what will become the wondrous pleasure and the eternity acquired by the person for ever and ever. (*Michtav M'Eliyahu — Ha'Amal b'Torah hu HaS'char* — 3:285).

**Medrashim** discuss this:

All of the Torah which we learn in *Olam Ha'zeh* is like nothing compared to the Torah in *Olam Haba*, since in *Olam Ha'zeh* a person can learn Torah and forget it. (***Kohelet Rabba* 2:1**).

In *Olam Ha'zeh*, death does not allow man to have [complete] *simcha*, but in *Olam Haba*, death will be banished. (***Tanchuma — Vayechi* 3**).

*Olam Ha'zeh* has wars and difficulties. And the *yeitzer hara* (negative inclination) along with the *Malach HaMavet* (Angel of Death) have the ability to control the world. But in *Olam Haba*, there will be no difficulties, no suffering, and no subjugation. (***Medrash V'Yosheah* 22**).

## The Greatness of *Olam Haba*

The **Rambam** wrote:

Perhaps this good will seem trivial in our eyes. There is no way in *Olam Ha'zeh* to be able to appreciate and to understand the great benefit that there will be for the *nefesh* in *Olam Haba* — because while we are in *Olam Ha'zeh*, we can understand only the good of the body, which is what we desire. That exceedingly great [spiritual] good [of *Olam Haba*] cannot be compared to the good of *Olam Ha'zeh*, except by way of analogy. There is no way to really compare the benefits for the *nefesh* in *Olam Haba* with what is good for the body in *Olam Ha'zeh*, such as food and drink. Rather that great good [in *Olam Haba*], which cannot really be understood, is beyond any value or comparison. (***Hilchot Teshuva* 8:6**).

That enjoyment is indivisible and indescribable. It cannot even be intimated by means of an allegory. It can only be hinted at, as the prophet has done. When he realized the greatness of this absolute good and its high level, King David declared (*Tehillim* 31, 20): “And how great is Your bounty that You have hidden for those who fear You!” And they explain that the “enjoyment of the Divine Presence” means that these souls are elated by what they grasp and know of the true nature of G-d, the same as the holy *Chayot* and the other classes of Angels are elated by their understanding and knowledge of His Essence. The final good and purpose, therefore, is to reach and join this exalted group at that high level... This is the great good to which no other good can be compared. No pleasure can equal it, for how can that which is eternal be compared to something transitory? (***Perek Chelek***).

**Rav Dessler** adds:

Who could possibly understand or imagine with their intelligence the incredible treasure they will merit [in *Olam Haba*]? Every degree of victory over the *yetzer hara* for the sake of Heaven will lead to an independent aspect of the revelation of the reality of Hashem. Fortunate will be the one who merits this. How much will the days of his life be filled with spiritual elevation from Torah and *mitzvot* in this world, and how much will he grow through this elevated life in *Olam Haba*! How wondrous are these things for the one who understands what their greatness will be in *Olam Haba*. (*Michtav M'Eliyahu* 287–2 88).

## ***Tzadikim* will be amazed by their *s'char* in *Olam Haba***

**Rav Dessler** explained:

The *Medrash* says that Rebbe Abahu was shown his future *s'char* before his death — thirteen rivers of pure *afarsimon*, a hint to the wonders of how Hashem relates to us with the thirteen *middot* of *rachamim* (aspects of mercy). He asked — “Who is all of this for?” and was told — “For you.” He was amazed, and exclaimed — “All of this for Abahu? I thought that my toil had been for nothing, and my strength had been spent for emptiness. However, Hashem is just.” (*Bereshit Rabba* 62b, *Shemot Rabba* 52:3) The *tzadikim*, in their humility, will be amazed and startled by the *s'char* that will be given to them. (*Michtav M'Eliyahu — Hispatchus S'char* — 5:383).

**While there is *bracha* and *klalah* (blessing and curse) in *Olam Ha'zeh*, true *s'char* and *onesh* (eternal positive and negative consequences) are only in *Olam Haba*.**

The **Rambam** addresses what seems to be a basic contradiction in the giving of *s'char* and *onesh* (positive and negative consequences for our actions):

When we follow all of the *mitzvot* in the Torah, we will get all of the goodness of *Olam Ha'zeh*; and when we transgress them, all of the negatives that are written will occur. But even so, all of that good [in *Olam Ha'zeh*] is not the ultimate benefit for the *mitzvot*, and all of that negative is not the ultimate retribution for those who transgress all of the *mitzvot*.

Rather, the reconciliation for all of these matters is the following — Hashem gave us this Torah as an *etz chayim* (a tree of life). All who follow what is written in it along with having a proper understanding of it, will merit life in *Olam Haba*. And they will merit this according to the abundance of their actions, and the greatness of their wisdom. And the Torah promises that if we follow [the *mitzvot*] with *simcha* and a good heart, and study the wisdom [of Torah] consistently, that He will remove whatever could prevent us from doing this, like sickness, war, famine, and similar things. And He will bestow upon us all of the good which will strengthen our ability to follow the Torah, like satiation, peace, and an abundance of silver and gold, so we will not need to spend all of our days on our bodily needs. Rather, we will [be able to] sit *panui* (unobstructed), learn wisdom and do *mitzvot*, in order to merit life in *Olam Haba*. And similarly, the Torah informs us that if one abandons the Torah willfully to be involved in nonsense, that the true Judge will [then] remove from him all the bounty of *Olam Ha'zeh* which enabled him to rebel, and bring upon him all of the negatives which will [then] prevent him from acquiring *Olam Haba*, so that he will be destroyed in his wickedness.

The message of all of the *brachot* (blessings) and *klalot* (curses) is — If you serve G-d with *simcha* and guard His way, you will get all of these *brachot*, and all of these curses will be distanced from you, until you will be free to gain wisdom from the Torah and delve into it, in order to merit life in *Olam Haba*. **You will end up meriting both worlds** — a good life in *Olam Ha'zeh* which will bring you to life in *Olam Haba*. After all, if you don't acquire wisdom here, and you have no good deeds, with what will you merit?

And if you abandon G-d and go astray after food, drink, and illicit relations, and similar things, all of these *klalot* will be brought upon you, and all of these *brachot* will be removed, until your days will be finished in fear and confusion. Your heart won't be free and your body won't be complete to do the *mitzvot*, in order to be destroyed from life in *Olam Haba*. **You will then end up losing both worlds**, since when a person is busy with *Olam Ha'zeh*, with illness, war, and famine, he won't be involved in either wisdom or *mitzvot*, which would allow him to merit life in *Olam Haba*. (**Hilchot Teshuva 9:1**).

**This should all be *I'zechut ul'iluy nishmat* Ruchama Rivka, a"h, bat Asher Zevulun**